

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: In the Fullness of the Times...

Joseph - and the Birth of Jesus

(Matthew 1:18-25)

Introduction: The “other” birth story...

In the New Testament, we find two, separate birth narratives of Jesus. One is in Luke’s Gospel; the other is in Matthew’s.

Luke takes over twenty-five hundred words and most of two chapters to tell the story. He includes the announcement to Zechariah of the news of the birth of his son, John, to him and Elizabeth - all of which we saw last week.

He also tells us about the announcement to Mary that she will give birth to a son, Mary’s visit with Elizabeth, John’s birth, and Zechariah’s prophecy, ending with the actual Bethlehem birth story.

Matthew’s telling takes eight verses. It takes 65 seconds to read. And besides being far shorter than Luke’s account, Matthew’s telling is Joseph-centric.

By the time we get to the birth story, Matthew, who was one of Jesus’ twelve apostles, had already given us Jesus’ genealogy. (1:1-17)

Beginning with the father of the Jews, Abraham, Matthew traced Jesus’ family tree forward to Joseph, ***[Matthew 1:16] the***

husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

Matthew moves straight from Jesus’ genealogy to Jesus’ birth where we’ll hear nothing about a trip to Bethlehem or an overcrowded inn or a manger.

The very first words set the stage for what is to come.

DISRUPTION: The Announcement to Joseph (Matthew 1:18)

A Picture Perfect Engagement

[18] Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph...

Engagement/Betrothal in first century Israel

As there is for us, today, in the first century there was a period of time between single life and married life known as “betrothal” or “engagement.”

Today, the “engagement” is that special time reserved for frantic planning, hectic scheduling, nervous waiting, and high tension - perfect preparation for a relaxing wedding.

In the first century Jewish world, engagement / betrothal was different from our practice in a couple of ways.

A Jewish young man who wanted to marry a young woman would approach his own father and ask him to approach the father of the woman he wanted to marry.

The two fathers would talk and would come to an agreement about the two young people’s marriage, and the deal would be sealed with a betrothal ceremony.¹

¹ The betrothal ceremony normally took place in the middle of the day in the middle of the week - Wednesday.

The betrothal ceremony

At the ceremony, the father of the bride and the father of the groom would sign a written contract in the presence of the synagogue scribes.

The two families would exchange gifts with each other - in the case of Joseph and Mary, likely humble gifts.

Then, the priest would give his blessing:
*"Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe,
 Who has sanctified us by His Commandments.
 Blessed art Thou,
 Who sanctifies Israel by betrothal."*

After the blessing, the future bride and groom would share a cup of wine, and it was official. They were engaged.

Not married. Betrothed. Promised. They wouldn't live together as husband and wife for a full year. That year would be filled with preparations for married life.

The betrothed life

Besides preparing for the actual wedding, the future husband had to prepare a place for him and his bride to live. The future wife would be busy collecting things necessary to run the home.

In the first century, to be engaged to be married was serious. It was a much more serious commitment than an engagement is today.

The man and woman were pledged to each other and to break a betrothal was tantamount to divorce.

That was Joseph's and Mary's relationship as the story opens. And there is so much that we don't know that we would love to know about Joseph and Mary and their relationship.

Mary and Joseph were betrothed

Was this relationship arranged by parents? Did Mary and Joseph love each other?

How old were they? We assume that they were young (some traditions say that Joseph was much older than Mary), but the Bible gives us no clues.

What is clear is that their relationship was considered settled in the community. They had taken vows, and they would be married.

But, during engagement, there was to be no sexual intimacy. Given that, the words that follow are...complicating.

An Unexpected Pregnancy

[18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be pregnant...

Notice the two important pieces of news here. Mary is pregnant AND she is pregnant *before* she and Joseph "came together."²

Living in the culture in which we do, it is a challenge for us to grasp the seriousness of this bit of news. But in the context in which it was written - a small, Jewish village two thousand years ago - this would have been big news.

In most of what I've read over the years about the social mores of first century Israel, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy was an out-of-bounds situation that brought dishonor to the couple and to the families.

² This is a description of becoming husband and wife - borrowing from Genesis 2 where Moses describes a man and a woman becoming "*one flesh.*"

Keep that in mind as we read this story.³

Keep in mind, too, that Mary was found to be with child during the time when she was engaged to Joseph. So, it is an easy jump for us to assume, and it would have been an easy jump for friends and family to have assumed that Joseph was the father.

But Matthew was explicit. Mary was pregnant ***“before they came together.”***

Joseph was not the father.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

[18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Something has happened here that will disrupt Mary’s and Joseph’s well laid out Plan A for their lives. And the thing that has happened here is holy. It is from God, and it is the most outrageous miracle in history.

Nowhere does Matthew try to get biological. He doesn’t explain. He simply affirms.

He knows and he knows that we know about the birds and the bees. We understand that this sort of thing - a virgin pregnancy - doesn’t happen. Matthew and his audience “got it” too.

But the Bible tells us that there was no human father involved in the conception of the Baby in Mary’s womb.

God the Holy Spirit was involved in this conception in a way in which He has never been involved in the conception of any other baby.

The stories of Mary’s Son that we read through the rest of Matthew’s book are of miracles of healings, nature miracles, exorcisms, and even resurrection from the dead. We accept the possibility of all those miracles against the backdrop of this that we see here.

It happened that Joseph, Mary’s fiancée, became aware of Mary’s pregnancy before he was aware of God’s involvement in her pregnancy.

So, not surprisingly, Joseph came to a certain conclusion about her pregnancy. That led him to make a very understandable “Plan B” to replace the Plan A of marrying Mary.

But Matthew doesn’t want you and me to think poorly of Joseph. He was a good guy.

DAMAGE CONTROL: Joseph Plans to Send Mary Away (v. 19)

[19] And her husband Joseph, since he was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

Righteous Joseph

Joseph loved God. He organized his life around the commandments and the wisdom of God’s Word. He was serious about his life before God. We would have recognized Joseph as an upstanding, loving, caring, righteous, moral man. But Joseph wasn’t stupid.

Sensible Joseph

He knew, but didn’t know

He noticed - as everybody else would have noticed - that the body of his fiancée was changing. She was with child.

³ In a first century Jewish village, most families shared a very close-knit communal style living arrangement. The discovery of Mary’s condition could certainly have been made at home, likely by Mary’s mother.

Matthew doesn't tell us if Mary had explained the unique circumstance of her pregnancy or not.

She may have NOT told him. Or, she may have told him, and he didn't believe her.

My suspicion is that Mary told Joseph that she had not been unfaithful to him. But we don't know that. The Bible doesn't tell us that.

Unconvinced

Jewish young men like Joseph knew how these things happen. The wheels in his head were turning - *"She says she hasn't been with another man. But babies aren't born to virgins."*

Joseph was left with the only explanation possible: The woman to whom he was promised, the woman with whom he had been planning to spend the rest of his life had been unfaithful to him.

He certainly hadn't slept with Mary; some other man must have.

So, what will Joseph do? After all, he had options.⁴

Compassionate Joseph

According to the Law

The normal way to deal with something like this was by way of annulment. The engagement would be called off.

However, given the seriousness of betrothal / engagement in those days, the ending of engagement required that a formal document be drawn up, consisting of charges against Mary.

They would then be legally "divorced."

Of course, had Joseph thought that he might have been the father, he might well have tried to hurry up the wedding date. But he knew he wasn't the father, so that is not what he planned. He planned to end the engagement.

The charge against Mary - adultery - was typically brought in a very public way. The guilty party - Mary - would be exposed to humiliation and scandal and Joseph was not willing to bring about Mary's public shaming.

Plan B

So, for obvious reasons, he couldn't be Mary's husband. It would be shameful for him to marry her now that she was carrying another man's baby.⁵

But he would not go further than he had to go in divorcing her. He would keep things quiet. Private. Secret.

Maybe the plan involved freeing Mary up to leave town for the duration of the pregnancy to save face.

Mary would then be free of her vows to Joseph. She would be free to marry the father of her child. Joseph may have assumed that Mary loved that other man.

This - a quiet divorce - was Joseph's Plan B.

I picture him exhausted from the planning, drained from the stress, and broken-hearted at the loss. He may have had in mind to go through with Plan B quickly.

But before he acted on his plan, he dropped off to sleep and had a dream. And this was *some dream*.

⁴ Under Old Testament law, the death penalty was called for in cases of immorality. However, the Jews had lost the legal authority, under Roman rule, to carry out capital punishment.

⁵ Matthew says that Joseph didn't want to disgrace Mary because he was a righteous man. Is it reading too much into the word "righteous" to say that Joseph also loved Mary?

Many people have vivid dreams, regularly. Maybe you do. I don't. I rarely remember what I dream.

Joseph's dream was as vivid as could be. And this dream effectively killed his Plan B.

VISITATION: An Angel En-COURAGED Joseph (vv. 20-23)

Reassurance (v. 20)

"Joseph, son of David"

[20] But when he had thought this over, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David..."

The name by which the angel addressed Joseph was more like a title. He called Joseph by name and then linked Joseph to an ancestor.

Since he was a Jew, we already knew that he was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It turns out that Joseph came from a very distinguished family, of the tribe of Judah (one of Jacob's sons) and the family of King David.

And as Matthew has already made clear in the genealogy (1:1-17), there is a straight line from David through all the kings who ever sat on the throne in Jerusalem, including David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah.⁶

No doubt, Joseph already knew all of this. The angel's greeting wasn't news. But I can easily imagine that Joseph wasn't often called, ***"Joseph, son of David."***

He was known as Joseph the carpenter, Joseph the fixer-upper, the handyman, not the descendant of kings.

But with this greeting, the angel had Joseph's full attention.

"Fear not"

[20] But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid..."

We're used to hearing angels say, ***"Fear not!"*** As we saw last Sunday, it was an unnerving thing to be in the presence of an angel.

But this angel is not telling Joseph, *"Relax, take it easy. I'm not going to hurt you."*

No, the angel's message is to urge Joseph to not be afraid to do something. ***[20]...do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife..."***

And there were lots of reasons why, for Joseph, marrying Mary would have been a fearful thing.

He could have feared...
...that he would be marrying a woman who loved another man.
...becoming a laughingstock in his community for marrying her after she had thrown him under the bus.
...the whole idea of raising another man's child.

Trust Mary; Trust God

The angel said, *"Joseph, you've got nothing to fear."* ***[20]... "for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."***

And with that, Joseph knew that Mary had not been unfaithful. In some way, the Holy Spirit was the Agent responsible for the Life growing in her womb.

With that explanation, the angel destroyed Joseph's carefully thought out, perfectly reasonable Plan B, and replaced it with God's Plan C.

⁶ Per the genealogy. (Matthew 1:1-17)

Joseph will follow through with his plan to marry Mary, now equipped with a vision for the role he will play in the life of the Child Mary was carrying.

Vision-Casting (14:21-23)

Joseph's mission (v. 21)

[21] "She will give birth to a Son; and you shall name Him Jesus..."

Mary's pregnancy will go full-term. At the end of her pregnancy, she'll bear a Son. And Joseph's assignment, his calling, is to be right there by Mary's side.

He was completely uninvolved in the conception of this Child. He is to be completely involved in the raising of this Child.

The angel has given Joseph a fatherly role here. Joseph will name the Child.

In Judaism, the father names the child. Joseph knew that this Baby wasn't his. But he understood that he will be the only human father Mary's Child will ever know.

It will be Joseph's job to teach this Child the ways of the world, life lessons, wisdom, a trade.

He will walk the streets of Nazareth with this Boy by his side.

They'll sit together in the Nazareth synagogue on the Sabbath. He'll play with the Child, and he'll watch him grow to manhood.

Joseph will be the adoptive father to the Son of God. His name is Jesus.⁷...and there's just something about that Name.

The Child's mission

[21] "...for He will save His people from their sins."

The name - Jesus - is simply the Greek form of the name "Joshua" (or "Yeshua"), which means, "*Yahweh is salvation.*"

Then, Matthew tells us that all of this - Mary's conception, pregnancy, and the Baby in her womb - was to fulfill a prophecy from Isaiah.

[22] Now all this took place so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled: [23] "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN WILL CONCEIVE AND GIVE BIRTH TO A SON, AND THEY SHALL NAME HIM IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."⁸

Here at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel we have one of the most concise and beautiful summaries of the mission of Mary's Child.

The angel said nothing about a revived Jewish monarchy or about deliverance from Roman oppression. He didn't say anything about political freedom or economic freedom.

This Child is uniquely "**God with us.**" Yep. We get that. Mary was pregnant with a Child conceived by the Holy Spirit.

And because of who He IS, He will bring what nobody else could bring. He will bring freedom. Spiritual freedom from the penalty and the bondage of sin.

Joseph got to hear the message of Jesus' mission straight from the angel's lips.

So, eleven days early, I'll just say it: Merry Christmas!

⁷ Jesus is one of a very few biblical characters named before birth, along with Isaac, Ishmael, Solomon, Josiah, and, of course, John the Baptist. Jewish rabbis later taught that Moses was named, pre-birth, but that is not found in Scripture.

⁸ Isaiah 7:14.

And I'm really glad you're here today to sing great songs and to hear the part of the wonderful story of Jesus we've heard today.

But if you are here and have never considered Jesus' mission and the purpose for which He was conceived, you have got to get this.

You may well have problems. We all do.

Your problems may be related to health or money or job or friends or family. And if you have problems in any or all of these areas, I'm really sorry.

I'll pray for you in these. My dream is that our church family will be a supportive community for you and that we'll help you with your problems.

But none of these that I've listed are the biggest problem any of us have. Our biggest problems are that we have sinned and that we are spiritually dead and separated from God.

That's the bad news. Here is the good news.

Jesus has come.

As John the Baptist said, He was the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. (John 1:29) When He died on the cross as a perfect sacrifice, Jesus suffered the penalty for all sin - yours, mine, and everyone else's - for all time. (That's atonement.)

Now, the wrath of God has been turned away from us (that's propitiation), and we can freely come to Him through faith in Jesus and receive the no-strings-attached gift of life - eternal life (that's justification).

Today, not long from our celebration of His birth, would be the best of all possible times for you to come to God through faith in Jesus.

When you believe in Him, He gives you the best gift you'll ever receive: LIFE, eternal. That is God's invitation to you, today.

So, Joseph now knows the mission of Mary's Baby. Watch his response to the mission God's angel gave him.

COURAGE AND FAITH: Faithful Joseph (vv. 24-25)

Upon waking up from the most amazing dream of his life, Joseph did exactly what he had feared to do, but which the angel told him he need not fear to do.

[24] And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, [25] but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he named Him Jesus.

He did not divorce Mary. He took her as his wife. He cared for her as lovingly as any husband cares for his wife. And he didn't touch her until Jesus was born.

I personally believe that Joseph's complete turnaround from a solid plan for annulment to a decision to take Mary as his wife is among the strongest evidences we have for the truth of the Incarnation.

How else can we explain Joseph's abrupt change in his posture toward Mary, but that the unbelievable and incredible message to Joseph was believable and credible? It was all true.

The angel had told him, "***Do not be afraid...***"

So, Joseph rejected fear. Faithfully and courageously, he followed God into a future he would have never chosen, but once embraced, he would never regret.

He took Mary's Child under his wing as if he were His father - and named Him Jesus.

Conclusion:

When Joseph's beautiful Plan A got disrupted, he reasonably developed a Plan B. But God called Joseph to follow His Plan C...which he did.

By that obedience God gave Joseph a transcendent purpose in life that allowed him to play a role in bringing blessing to the whole world through Jesus.

This morning, we have seen Joseph's story, and we admire his courageous faith.

We are inspired by how he accepted the disruption of his life plans and became a player in God's redemptive work.

But Joseph's story is not a "one-off." We can all see ourselves in his story. We who believe in Jesus will frequently find our Plans (A and B and C and D!) derailed.

Then God calls us to His new, unexpected, maybe painful but redemptive Plan X, by which He plans to bless us and use us to bring blessing to our world.

For instance...

A man in one of the countries of central Asia (one of the "...stans") is married and has children. He is on a good career path and life is good. His Plan A is to continue, as is, into further upward mobility.

Then, someone tells him about Jesus. Soon, he believes and becomes a Christian. He starts living for Jesus and talking about Jesus - and, well, goodbye, upward mobility.

That's because, in many of these mostly Islamic countries, Christianity is opposed. Outspoken Christians lose status and lose jobs. Their children lose educational opportunities.

That is now this man's - and this man's family's - new Plan X. He can now glorify God by shining in the darkness.

That same thing happens to our brothers and sisters in countries all over the world - China, Columbia, Vietnam, Indonesia, North Korea, and many more.

That's how our worldwide Christian family members embrace their new and often harder role in God's Plan X for their life.

We can follow Joseph's lead in embracing God's Plan X when life throws us a curve and redefines "normal."

I've seen how some of you are doing as life has thrown you a curve...

...with the devastating loss of a child.

...with a serious health challenge.

...with a downward reversal of fortune.

...with a relational fracture.

...with a family member - child, spouse, parent - in some special need.

Your example is inspiring. Thank you for your faithfulness. Stay the course.

We have seen today that Joseph's life was immeasurably richer for having followed God's plan for him - and it was harder.

We may or may not get a vivid dream or a visit from an angel. But we hear the words, "***Do not be afraid...***" and agree to eagerly follow and to shine wherever He leads.

Again - MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Today we embrace the idea that following Jesus may result in great disruption. We embrace the call to follow Jesus. Period.

There is no better Plan than to embrace our role in God's Plan.